

Son Preference in a Welfare State: The Case of Vietnamese Australian Families

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Son preference has traditionally been a fundamental cultural value in Vietnamese families, and this preference appears to have intensified in Vietnam in recent years. The key explanation for why parents prefer sons to daughters is that Vietnamese families embrace Confucian notions of gender hierarchy. Based on in-depth interviews with twenty first-generation Vietnamese migrant parents from refugee and skilled migrant backgrounds, and 18 Vietnamese Australian children of migrant parents, this paper explores whether Vietnamese migrants to Australia and their children display a preference for sons in their families. The findings suggest that sons are no longer valued in the ways that they were in Vietnam. Many parents in this study did not express a need to live with, receive financial support from, or be cared for by their sons. The children also expressed fewer financial support and caring obligations to parents. We propose that the greater financial security afforded to the elderly by the social welfare system in Australia may decrease parents' dependence on sons, lowering the value of sons in families. This strongly suggests that the economic value of sons is key to the persistence of son preference in Vietnam, more so than Confucian notions of gender hierarchy.

Keywords: Vietnamese migrant, son preference, migrant family, Australia

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Introduction

In many Asian societies there is a strong preference for sons. Over several decades, there has been an increase in the sex ratio at birth favoring sons throughout Asia (Nanda *et al.* 2012; Den Boer and Hudson 2017). In Vietnam, for example, although the national fertility rate decreased from 2.25 in 2001 to 1.99 in 2011 (Vietnam GSO 2013), the sex ratio saw a dramatic rise, from 104 boys per 100 girls in 2003 to 113.8 in 2013 (Vietnam GSO 2013). Sex selection technologies, including female infanticide and abortion, have been used by many couples in order to birth sons (Guilmoto 2012; Kadoya and Khan 2017). Despite economic development and social changes in many Asian countries, son preference still strongly persists in parents' attitudes (Das Gupta *et al.* 2003).

The reasons that parents prefer sons over daughters are of great interest to researchers. A key explanation in the literature is Confucian values related to gender hierarchy. While daughters are seen as "children of others," sons are considered central to the parents' identity and play a particularly important role in continuing the patriarchal family line (Bélanger 2002; Nanda *et al.* 2012). Others argue that the economic value of sons in terms of financial support to parents' material well-being also fosters son preference (Caldwell 2005; Guilmoto 2015). Scholars have long investigated this issue by presenting evidence of economic and social development in many Asian countries as the main factor impacting son preference practices (Luong Van Hy 2003; Chung and Das Gupta 2007; Den Boer and Hudson 2017). However, there has been little discussion about the relations between social welfare support, health care for aging parents, and son preference attitudes in the migration context. Further, little is known about parents' and children's views and practices related to the value of sons and how this cultural value has been modified/preserved across generations in the migrant family.

Our paper is designed to fill the gap in the literature by presenting the voices of twenty first-generation Vietnamese migrant parents, from refugee and skilled-migrant backgrounds, and 18 Vietnamese Australian children to explore whether son preference persists in a migration context where parents have access to a strong social welfare system and enjoy financial security, like in Australia. This paper asks the questions: What are the views of first-generation migrant parents and children of migrants to Australia regarding son preference in families? And why do they preserve, modify, or reject this cultural value?

In the following sections, we discuss son preference in Vietnamese families, the Vietnamese community in Australia, social welfare policies for the elderly in Australia, and literature on the economic value of sons and the persistence of son preference across contexts. We then discuss the study and its findings, showing that son preference is both

reduced and qualitatively changed in first-generation Vietnamese migrants and largely absent in the children of such migrants. In our analysis we consider why this is the case, arguing that the presence of a public pension and superannuation system supports Vietnamese migrant parents in old age, reducing the need for sons to provide for the parents materially. The findings contribute to the growing body of research aimed at understanding the modifications of cultural values in a migration context. It can therefore be suggested that economic development and an expanded social welfare system could reduce the patriarchal obligation of sons in the family. However, sons also perform important cultural rituals, such as ancestor worship, and provide social support to parents; and the shift away from son preference also brings with it a lesser commitment to those cultural practices. This was experienced as a loss or a concern for some participants, but for most it was an acceptable trade-off.

Son Preference in Vietnamese Families

Historically, cultural values in Vietnamese families have been strongly influenced by “rice culture” or “irrigated crops,” Buddhist beliefs, and the teachings of Confucianism. As a result of these influences, three key sets of cultural values—harmony and solidarity, filial piety, and gender hierarchy—have persisted in Vietnamese families over generations (Kibria 1995; Pham Van Bich 1999; Tran Thi Thanh Giang 2018). These family values mutually reinforce each other to shape family relationships such as those between parents and children, husbands and wives, and children and their siblings and relatives. Son preference is part of gender hierarchy but is also related to harmony and solidarity and filial piety.

Gender hierarchy underpinned Vietnamese culture and emerged from Confucian thought. It was imported to Vietnam from China and situated fathers and husbands as the pillars of the home through their role as the primary breadwinners and household decision makers (Pham Van Bich 1999; Rydstrom 2006). According to Confucian thought, sons are needed for patrilineal reasons, to carry on the family name and line. This patrilineal obligation brings with it responsibilities, including the ritual worship of ancestors and the care of aging parents (Kibria 1995; Pham Van Bich 1999). Thus, eldest sons along with their wives and children usually live with the son’s parents after marriage. They are required to shoulder the main responsibilities of taking care of parents socially and economically. Further, in Vietnamese families, the relationship with ancestors is powerful: one shows respect for the souls of the dead through ritual worship of ancestors, and sons play a pivotal role in this. Sons are expected to worship their parents when they

pass away and maintain the practice of ancestor worship in their families, while women are expected to worship their husbands' ancestors (Rydström 1998; Rydström 2006).

It has been found that the main reason for the persistence of son preference in Vietnam is the continuity of lineage, which includes family name and ancestor worship. In a survey conducted in 2012 on the reasons for having boys in Vietnam, 69 percent of respondents expressed the importance of sons for maintaining the family lineage (Nanda *et al.* 2012). A family name or lineage is passed on only by sons; daughters' surnames are not passed from one generation to another, because daughters are expected to marry out to another family. Therefore, the first as well as subsequent sons are considered to be under the greatest pressure to have their own sons for the continuity of the family line (Rydström 1998). Further, sons play an essential role in cultural rituals. If sons are absent, the responsibility for performing these rituals is transferred to a nephew or another male family member, but not to a daughter. Women cannot even practice the family rituals of their birth families after they get married (Bélangier 2002; Guilmoto 2015; Hoang Lan Anh 2016).

In contemporary Vietnam, son preference still persists and may even have intensified (Guilmoto 2012; 2015). Jonathan and Dominique Haughton (1995) have found that although many Vietnamese women are well educated and participate equally in the labor workforce, they still prefer sons. In many rural areas, the birth of a son is still the most significant event in a woman's life and can elevate her status with her parents-in-law; it can also be viewed as insurance against polygyny, divorce, and even domestic violence (Bélangier 2002). Elder sons are still obliged to provide for and often co-reside with aging parents. Although in recent decades the Vietnamese government has improved the social welfare system by introducing government pensions and subsidized health care, these social security schemes provide limited assistance for the elderly (Den Boer and Hudson 2017). Many older adults in rural areas continue to have low living standards and face financial problems (Bui The Cuong *et al.* 2000). As a result, most elders still depend on their immediate families, especially adult children or sons, as their primary sources of support and care (Goodkind *et al.* 1999; Den Boer and Hudson 2017).

It is evident, then, that son preference remains an important norm in Vietnamese families. Sons play a key role in carrying on the family name, worshipping ancestors, and taking care of parents. While modernization and urbanization may have led to changes in household composition and changed some expectations of family relationships, the obligations of sons to look after their parents and carry on the family lineage clearly persist. In other words, the Confucian ideology related to the sons' role persists in many families in contemporary Vietnam. However, there is little information on what happens to this fundamental cultural value upon migration: do these practices and obligations

persist in a migration context?

Vietnamese Community and Social Welfare Policies for the Elderly in Australia

The Vietnamese community in Australia is complex, with people having arrived for different reasons and from different backgrounds and generations. According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS 2019), the Vietnamese community is the sixth largest ethnic group in Australia, with approximately 236,700 people, accounting for 1 percent of the population. The largest Vietnamese community group in Australia is made up of refugees who left Vietnam mainly after the fall of the Saigon regime on April 30, 1975 (Viviani 1984). During the 1980s and 1990s, Vietnamese migrants arrived under the Family Reunion Program. More recently, there has been a new group of Vietnamese migrants to Australia: skilled migrants who have foreign language proficiency and professional knowledge and migrate by choice. Australia is a destination of choice for many Vietnamese skilled migrants because of its perceived educational, economic, and employment opportunities (Watkins *et al.* 2003).

Australia is considered to be a nation with effective social welfare for the aged (Gray and Aglias 2009; Agnew 2013). Australian social welfare policies have been designed to support older adults by providing pension and health-care assistance. The pension system has three pillars: old-age pension, superannuation guarantee, and voluntary retirement savings (Agnew 2013). The first pillar, old-age pension, was introduced in 1909. It is available from age 65 and is paid subject to income and assets tests. This pension provides a basic income to those with incomes and assets below specified threshold levels. Approximately two-thirds of current retirees in Australia rely on pension as their main source of income (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2007). The second pillar, superannuation guarantee, commenced in 1992. It requires all employers to make contributions on behalf of their employees into individual accounts in a superannuation fund. Benefits from superannuation savings can be taken at the age of 56. These first two pillars are supplemented by the third pillar, voluntary long-term savings, including voluntary superannuation contributions (Agnew 2013; Bateman and Liu 2017). Under the three-pillar pension system, older adults in Australia are provided with financial stability.

Health-care assistance is also an essential service for the elderly in Australia. This is provided through government (commonwealth, state/territory, and local), community, and voluntary sector programs (particularly families and carers), as well as the for-profit and not-for-profit sectors (Parliament 2003). All older adults can access services such

as residential services, aged care services, carer assistance, and dementia support programs. Recently, home care packages have been introduced for older Australians through which they can access affordable care services to receive help at home. This service enables the aged to live the best life they can (Laragy and Vasiliadis 2020).

In addition, all retirees in Australia are eligible for government benefits such as the senior card scheme—offering discounts on transport and other services—the commonwealth seniors health card, and the pensioner concession card. The last two provide access to cheaper health care, medicine, and other discounts (Parliament 2003). With the three-pillared approach, Australian older adults are well supported. This is a very different situation from Vietnam, where, as discussed above, sons are expected to provide for and care for parents in the absence of state support.

The Economic Value of Sons and the Persistence of Son Preference Beliefs

The economic value of children/sons has also been seen as a key reason for son preference. According to the wealth flow theory of demographic transition (Caldwell 1982; 2005), the high cost of having children is an important concern to parents. John Caldwell argues that the economic value that comes from children benefits individuals, couples, or families and contributes directly to high or low fertility rates. Caldwell (1982; 2005) further notes that the economic value of children is determined primarily by the direction of the intergenerational wealth flow, which has been from younger to older generations in all traditional societies, such as Vietnam, particularly from children to parents.

The wealth flow of resources between children and parents includes money, goods, services, and guarantees that one person will provide for another (Caldwell 2005). In Caldwell's view, there are two types of society: one with stable high fertility, where children provide their parents with resources; and the other with lower fertility rates, where children receive resources from their parents. The economic value of sons, thus, is one of the important factors influencing the persistence of son preference beliefs in many societies (Bélanger 2002; Guilmoto 2015).

Caldwell's notions of the economic value of children and intergenerational wealth flow have been characterized by scholars as an important tool to analyze fertility transition and the persistence of son preference in many countries. According to Pauline Rossi and Léa Rouanet (2015) and James Raymo *et al.* (2015), parents who expect to be financially supported by and live with their children when they are old desire larger numbers of children. Further, sons' economic value has been found to be the main factor influencing the continuing requirement for male offspring in Vietnam's rural areas (Bélanger

2002). While the economic value of daughters declines when they marry, parents in Danièle Bélanger's study invested in sons to safeguard their own future (Bélanger 2002). Similarly, in a survey on son preference in Nepal, Priya Nanda *et al.* (2012) found that the care that sons provide to parents in old age and their sharing of the workload burden are among the most important reasons for having a boy in that country.

Caldwell's theory of intergenerational wealth flow has been extended and modified by scholars to argue that the patriarchal value attached to sons is still the main factor influencing the persistence of special privileges for sons (Hsuing 1988; Whyte 2004). Similarly, Carol Vlassoff (1990) revealed that economic factors alone did not account for the pervasive son preference in an Indian community where sons had a deeper cultural significance that persisted even when widows were financially well-off or independent. Likewise, the ideology of filial duties is still thought of as a key aspect of a son's moral duty in Vietnam, even if the parents are not in need of assistance (Barbieri 2009).

However, the high economic value of sons for parents has been reduced by social changes and economic development. Research into the field of gender demography indicates that economic and social development in many Asian countries has had a significant impact on gender hierarchies (Luong Van Hy 2003; Chung and Das Gupta 2007). Industrialization and urbanization, for example, have impacted the ability of sons to provide emotional and financial support to their aging parents in many rural areas. When sons move to cities to study and work, it is difficult for them to take day-to-day care of their aging parents (Luong Van Hy 2003; Barbieri 2009). This is further exacerbated in the case of international migration, where children move far away from their parents. Further, public policies often play an important role in helping to reduce son preference. Efforts made by the Korean government to reduce son preference in recent decades include raising levels of female education and promoting female labor force participation (Chung and Das Gupta 2007).

Migrants tend to arrive in their new home with their own distinct set of cultural values associated with their homeland (McDonald 1995). In the literature on the continuities of cultural values in migrant families, migrant parents have been described as clinging to cultural values belonging to their country of origin (Chaichian 1997; Foner 1997). They also tend to apply their values of origin in bringing up their children (Herrero-Arias *et al.* 2021). Through the sharing of values across generations, many of the cultural values associated with the migrants' homeland persist strongly after migration (Renzaho *et al.* 2011; Tingvold *et al.* 2012; Choi *et al.* 2013). Different experiences prior to migration and different times of departure have also been identified as important variables influencing parents' attitudes toward cultural maintenance in migrant families (Bottomley 1979; McDonald 1995). For example, refugees have been discussed in the

literature as a particular group that hold on to the cultural values of their homeland at the time they left, carefully preserving those values in their new land as a special way to maintain their cultural identity and to recover after losing homes, property, status, and family members (Camino and Krulfeld 1994; Malkki 1995). These experiences, however, are considered to be different from those of skilled migrants, who generally have lived with the modern and multicultural values of their country before departure, migrated by choice, have foreign language proficiency, hold necessary qualifications, and possess background knowledge about the country of destination (Nguyen Hong Chi 2014).

Cultural values related to son preference are brought by many migrants to their new cultural settings. The current literature on son preference in the context of migration shows the persistence of these values in many Asian immigrant communities in Western countries (e.g., Kale 2012; Almond *et al.* 2013; Postulart and Srinivasan 2018). For example, Douglas Almond *et al.* (2013) found a tendency to select sons over daughters by abortion among first-generation immigrants arriving in Canada as adults. Similarly, evidence from Britain has revealed that while the fertility rate of India-born mothers in England and Wales decreases, there is an increase in the sex ratio at birth and sex-selective abortion occurring among this group (Dubuc and Coleman 2007). Commenting on this issue, Rajendra Kale has strongly argued: “When Asians migrated to western countries they brought welcome recipes for curries and dim sum. Sadly, a few of them also imported their preference for having sons and aborting daughters” (Kale 2012, 387). In other words, the son preference ideology has not only persisted strongly in Asian immigrant parents’ attitudes but has also led to practices of fetal sex selection that discriminate against daughters in the new cultural setting.

To explain the factors influencing the modification and preservation of son preference in the migration context, it has been suggested that cultural assimilation may attenuate son preference. As Almond *et al.* (2013) have argued, first-generation immigrant families from South and East Asia in Canada are much more likely to exhibit son preference in their family-size choices than are second-generation families. The length of residence in the new destination influences cultural maintenance among these immigrant groups. However, by rejecting a solely cultural understanding of the factors contributing to these issues, recent attention has focused on gender, race, transnational dynamics of migration, and socioeconomic context of the country of migration (Postulart and Srinivasan 2018), as well as the availability of prenatal sex-selective techniques and legal abortion in the host society (Dubuc and Coleman 2007). These seem to indicate that son preference persists in immigrant communities because of conditions in the local context rather than the persistence of culture related to the Confucian ideology. Building on past research into the cultural, social, and economic value of sons and the persistence of son preference,

this paper provides important insights into the modifications of this Confucian cultural value when people migrate to a welfare state.

Research Methods

The open-ended nature of the research questions necessitates a qualitative approach (Waller *et al.* 2016). As discussed above, there have been two separate waves of Vietnamese migrants to Australia. Up until the 1990s, most Vietnamese migrants were from refugee backgrounds, whereas since the 1990s most have been skilled migrants. We were interested in whether first-generation migrant parents maintained a preference for sons: if so, why; and if not, why not. We were also interested in exploring whether the children of Vietnamese migrants from the two waves preferred sons for cultural reasons. We also wanted to investigate the differences in views and practices toward son preference between first-generation Vietnamese refugees and skilled migrants as the two groups were born and raised in different times in Vietnam and migrated to Australia under different social contexts and times.

Data was collected through in-depth interviews with twenty first-generation Vietnamese migrant parents and 18 second-generation Vietnamese Australian children. The inclusion criteria for first-generation participants were that they were born and raised in Vietnam, and that they had immigrated to Australia at the age of 18 or older (Rumbaut 2004). The first generation had to be parents. The children of migrants included people who were born or raised in Australia, and children who were born in Vietnam and brought to Australia between the ages of five and 12.

The first-generation Vietnamese refugees and skilled-migrant parent participants migrated to Australia at different times, with different class backgrounds, and under different social conditions. Ten parents came to Australia as refugees from both urban and rural areas in southern Vietnam. They had lived in Melbourne for approximately forty years. Most refugee participants were from working-class backgrounds and worked in unskilled jobs in factories, vegetable farms, and the like. Their ages ranged from fifty to 67 years. The other ten parent participants were skilled migrants who came from Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City, the two big cities in northern and southern Vietnam. They had lived in Melbourne for approximately ten years. The skilled-migrant participants worked as doctors, accountants, and lecturers in Melbourne.

Of the 18 second-generation children, ten came from refugee backgrounds and eight from skilled-migrant backgrounds. They were aged between 14 and 37, with the younger participants being children of skilled migrants and the older being children of refugees.

Of the twenty first-generation parents in the study, 15 had both sons and daughters while five had daughters only. Of the 18 second-generation participants, three had their own children.

Although the participants were recruited from the two main groups of the Vietnamese community in Australia, the sample size of the study was small. Therefore, the findings of the study cannot represent the entire Vietnamese community in Australia. Further, almost all the refugee participants were from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, while many refugees in Australia have obtained higher education and work in skilled occupations. The different backgrounds and resettlement in Australia of this group could influence the different strategies they adopt to preserve cultural norms in their lives.

The project was approved by a university human research ethics committee. For the recruitment of participants, flyers and email advertisements were sent to Melbourne Vietnamese community organizations to make sure a broad cross-section of Vietnamese could be selected to participate in the project. We also used word-of-mouth and snowball sampling techniques in the investigation, whereby existing participants suggested other potential participants (Neuman 2011; Waller *et al.* 2016). One of the limitations of this method is that it can produce a sample of participants with limited variation. To overcome this issue, we started by recruiting at least three unconnected participants for each group. We aimed for maximum variation in the sample (Waller *et al.* 2016) to identify a broad range of attitudes toward son preference.

Interviews were digitally recorded, and field notes were taken. All interviews with first-generation parents were conducted in Vietnamese, and all interviews with second-generation children were conducted in English. The interviews in Vietnamese were translated into English by the first author and subsequently checked by a professional interpreter. The interviews were guided by a semi-structured interview schedule with questions about beliefs and practices pertaining to the roles of sons in families. The interviews were conducted by the first author, who is Vietnamese but neither a skilled migrant nor from a refugee background. Being an “insider” with the participants allowed the first author to relate to the Confucian cultural values in Vietnamese families. Parents were asked for their views toward son preference, and the reasons why they wanted to discontinue, preserve, or modify the son’s role in families. Children were asked about their parents’ and their own attitudes toward the roles of sons in families. Both parents and children were also asked about their practices toward the roles of sons in their daily lives. The transcripts were imported to NVivo software and coded thematically. The thematic analysis focused on the identification of themes emerging from the transcripts recorded through interviews (Waller *et al.* 2016).

Results

Through the analysis, we found that migrant parents and children of migrant parents from both skilled and refugee backgrounds largely rejected son preference. The main reason was that sons were not important for providing financial assistance to parents or taking care of elders in Australia. In the Australian context, where older people are strongly supported by the social welfare system through old-age pension, superannuation policies, and retirement services (Agnew 2013; Laragy and Vasiliadis 2020), many of the Vietnamese parents and children did not see the need to retain the traditional value of sons in their families.

“The Son Is Not Significant at All”: Parents’ and Children’s Views

The refugee and skilled-migrant parent participants in this study were born and raised in different social and cultural contexts in Vietnam. They migrated to Australia at different times and for different reasons. Prior to migration, refugee participants had lived in “old Vietnam” over fifty years ago. At that time the country had been little affected by industrialization and modernization, and the Confucian values relating to son preference persisted strongly in many Vietnamese families (Pham Van Bich 1999; Lê Ngọc Văn 2012). Therefore, we might expect refugee parent participants to hold the cultural values from the time they left (Bottomley 1979). Further, many refugees had had traumatic experiences both prior to leaving Vietnam and at sea, such as attacks by pirates and family members going missing or dying. They began their lives in Australia under tough conditions, because they lacked English language skills, qualifications, and knowledge about their new country. Most did not enter the education system in Australia, and worked in unskilled jobs. In contrast, most skilled-migrant participants were born and raised after the Vietnam War and the economic reform (Đổi Mới). Most of them were well educated, had a mastery of English, and worked in professional fields. Although the experiences of refugee and skilled-migrant parents in this study were shaped by their distinct social, political, and migration contexts, almost all no longer valued sons in the ways they had in Vietnam. For example, Nam, a forty-year-old skilled-migrant father of two daughters, explained his attitude toward the role of sons:

If I lived in Vietnam, I would think about having sons and I would distinguish between sons and daughters. It is not really easy to forget the roles of sons when you live in Vietnamese society. [Because] When daughters get married, they move to live with their husband’s families and take care of their parents-in-law. It means that they will not be able to support you anymore.

Similarly, Tiên, 38, a skilled-migrant mother of two sons, said that giving birth to a son

was very important to her parents-in-law and improved her position within the family. Tiên gave birth to her first son when she was in Vietnam:

They [her parents-in-law] were very happy when I gave birth to my first son. I felt like they behaved better toward me. I became an important woman in their family at that time. My husband is the oldest son, so it was very important for them to have a male grandchild. However, I myself feel relaxed about the gender of my kids. Both sons and daughters are very nice to me.

Tiên explained how she achieved an elevated status in the eyes of her parents-in-law by having a son. Tiên was not alone in her experience. Almost all the mothers in the skilled-migrant group reported that while their husband's families in Vietnam wanted sons, they themselves did not care about the gender of their children now that they were in Australia.

In their interviews, many of the refugee-background parents also recalled the importance of having sons in Vietnam. For example, Hải, 68, a refugee father, recounting the story of the escape journey that his family made forty years ago, mentioned his views toward sons: "After discussing with my parents [about the escape plan], we decided to leave my middle son in Vietnam with them. You know, just in case we died in the sea, the son would continue the family line."

At the time they fled the country on a fishing boat, Hải and his wife took two of their three sons and one daughter with them. Before starting the dangerous journey, they carefully considered the sons' role in the family relating to the responsibilities of keeping the lineage. Hải's family was lucky to arrive safely in Australia. Three years later, the son who had been left in Vietnam arrived in Melbourne to join them under the Family Reunion Program. Interestingly, in his interview later about his family life in Melbourne with his children, Hải did not mention much about the roles of his sons in terms of lineage obligations. Rather, he talked about the equal roles of sons and daughters in preserving strong relationships with their extended families.

Hoa, a 55-year-old refugee-background mother, shared a similar view on having sons in her family: "If I had only one son, I would wish to have one more daughter. If I was in Vietnam, it might be different. I have only one daughter, so I think it is enough for me when living here."

Hoa spoke about the Vietnamese and Australian contexts and how her preferences were different in each place. At the time of the interview, Hoa's daughter has two children and lived nearby. Hoa noted that she helped her daughter by picking up the grandchildren from childcare and looking after them when her daughter needed her to. Hoa was happy having only a daughter.

When the children of migrants were asked about son preference, many of them did

not seem to be sure about the roles of sons in traditional Vietnamese families. This view was exemplified by Quân, a 17-year-old son of skilled migrants:

Keeping family line is when you marry, your child is going to keep family name. I don't know . . . I don't really care about family line because it is gonna be just the surname, so . . . My parents don't really expect me to hold the family name, so it is not important.

For Quân, lineage just meant a surname, which would be taken naturally by his children when he started a family. Quân came to Melbourne with his parents and his older brother when he was five years old. At the time of the interview, his brother had graduated from university and was working and living in another state. Quân lived with his parents in a nuclear family. Quân's extended family was still in Vietnam. In this case, the patrilineal importance of sons was challenged; Quân was not concerned about maintaining the family line.

Many of the children from refugee families were parents at the time of our interviews. The majority agreed that having sons was less important in Australia than in Vietnam. For example, 31-year-old Thu was born in Australia to a refugee family. She is now the mother of two sons and two daughters. She said:

In Vietnamese culture, it is a lot more important that you have to have sons, at least one son to carry on the family name . . . and pass it on to the next generations. But I don't feel like that is important for my children. I did not worry about what gender they were. . . . The son is not significant at all.

Thu was aware of Vietnamese family values in terms of keeping the family name, because she was raised in a refugee family that has been living in Australia for almost forty years. She married a Vietnamese Australian man from a refugee family; he is the eldest son in the family. In this situation, her husband was expected to take on the main obligations to his family (Kibria 1995; Lê Ngọc Vãn 2012). Despite this, Thu said she placed no special value or obligations on sons.

Factors Influencing the Lack of Son Preference

Superannuation, Old-Age Pension, and Own Savings: Financial Security for Parents
One of the main reasons the migrant parents in this study did not place a high value on sons was financial security. Almost all mentioned superannuation, pensions, and their own savings, which helped them to feel comfortable in their later lives. They did not expect their children/sons to provide them with financial support. In this case, the economic value of sons and the expected flow of wealth from children to parents (Caldwell 1982; 2005) were absent because the parents had their own financial resources. Eco-

conomic and social development have had a significant impact on parents' attitudes toward the importance of sons (Luong Van Hy 2003; Chung and Das Gupta 2007).

Most of the parents in the study used to work full-time, are working, or are retired. They are financially stable and not in need of assistance from their children. For example, 68-year-old Hải, a refugee father, stated:

I do not need them to express gratitude to me by giving me money, because I can set up everything by myself. I have worked for many years, so I have my superannuation, several hundred thousand dollars. I have my own house and car, so if I want to go on holiday I can go whenever on my own, without their financial support.

Hải used to be in the South Vietnamese army. He escaped from a re-education camp and left Vietnam after the Vietnam War. When he first came to Australia, he had to take manual jobs because he lacked English proficiency and other necessary skills. He retired after many years working in a factory and felt financially secure. Later in the interview, Hải spoke about the benefits of the Australian government's old-age pension. He believed that his superannuation and pension could easily support him in his old age (Agnew 2013). Many refugees in this study felt a peace of mind about their retirement income being enough to cover all their expenses. Although the refugee parents may have expected to need sons to provide for them in their old age, the reality in Australia was that sons were not necessary, and as a result this specific value of sons was diminished.

Like the retirees from a refugee background, more recently arrived skilled migrants also did not expect to receive financial support from their sons in their old age. Hồng, a 37-year-old mother of two young sons and lecturer at a university, believed that her generation should show gratitude to their parents by providing financial support, because in the Vietnamese cultural context parents depend on their children, especially the oldest sons (Guilmoto 2015; Den Boer and Hudson 2017). However, she did not expect her children to do the same for her:

I have to take care of my mum in Vietnam. This is my obligation, and my mum needs that, I guess. But I don't think I need my children to provide me money when I get older. I spend an amount of money to raise my kids, but I also have savings for myself so I can do everything I want when I get older. I will do everything by myself.

Hồng said that her mother was living in Vietnam with her brother. He was unemployed so could not support their mother financially. This meant that Hồng had to send money monthly to her family in Vietnam. In this case, Hồng felt financially secure not only with her savings but also with her independent life in Australia, where she did not need to consider the economic value of her sons like her mother did.

Hải and Hồng were typical of the parents in this study. Although the refugees with manual jobs had lower incomes than the skilled migrants with professional jobs, neither group expected their sons to provide for them in their old age. Sons were not needed in this way, and this affected their views about son preference more generally.

However, even though financial support was no longer necessarily a reason for preferring sons, the expectation that sons would provide company and emotional support still resonated for some refugee participants. For example, 65-year-old Thái, a refugee father, said:

I do want my children to help me when I am sick; I will feel better and not lonely. Although I know that the health-care systems and community services for elderly in Australia are very good, but . . . you know, just drop by my house, or make phone calls and so I could share emotion with them. It's very important for me, like Vietnamese saying: your children are your savings.

For Thái, the convenience of retirement services in Australia was not his focus; what he needed was for his children to live nearby, to visit, and to take care of him frequently. In this respect, his children made him feel safe in his old age. It is likely that the important role of children and sons still persists in such parents' beliefs despite the positive aspects of social security for the elderly in Australia because son preference is not just financial—it also involves lineage and emotional support.

Aged Care Services: Social Welfare Resources for Parents

One of the key aspects of son preference in Vietnam is the importance of sons—or first sons—living with and caring for their parents (Guilmoto 2015). However, most parent participants from both the refugee and skilled-migrant cohorts did not expect their children/sons to live with them when they were older or to be taken care of by them. Khuê, a 62-year-old refugee father, for example, explained that he felt confident about going to a nursing home despite his awareness of the cultural value of being taken care of by children:

I think as we are Vietnamese, so we always want to stay with children when we are older, but I should not do so. I do not want to annoy my children. A nursing home is a good idea when I need help.

Khuê has two sons. At the time of the interview, his two sons had started their own families and were living independently. Khuê and his wife were retired.

Similarly, Mi, a 63-year-old refugee mother, described her views about receiving help from her sons:

When I cannot do everything by myself any longer, I will go to a nursing home. They have their own families; they have to work very hard, and they are very busy, so I do not want to annoy them. Here, the retirement services are very professional in taking care of the elderly, so it is better for us. In Vietnam, it is terrible if children bring their parents to aged care services. This is seen as an extreme violation of children's moral standards, but here is Australia, you know.

Mi has three sons and had been a single mother for twenty years. She was not living with any of her sons at the time of the interviews. She ran a small hair salon. Elsewhere in her interview she spoke about feeling financially secure and living on her own. She felt happy with her independence and her work, enjoying offering haircuts to customers every day.

It is both uncommon and frowned upon in Vietnam for elderly people to live alone without their children's support, or in a nursing facility (Guilmoto 2015; Den Boer and Hudson 2017). Despite this, Khuê and Mi both expressed the sentiment that being cared for by others outside the family or living in a nursing home were positive options for them in Australia. Most parents in this study, like Khuê and Mi—who had both been living in Melbourne for forty years—had adult children who lived independently at the time of the interviews. They stressed that their children had their own families and their own lives, so they could not live with them. Their knowledge of resources outside the family available to the elderly in Australia, which facilitated closeness without co-residence between elderly parents and their children, appeared to make this possible.

Similarly, Trà, a 34-year-old skilled migrant who had been living in Australia for almost ten years, found the idea of not living with her children acceptable: "I don't think I can stay with them forever. Whenever they feel like moving out, we are happy about that because they are mature enough and have their own lives. We have our own lives too."

Trà came to Australia on her own to study. After graduating, she took on a job in New Zealand as a research assistant. After two years living there, she started a family and got a job in Melbourne as a lecturer. For many global citizens like Trà, living in the same house as their adult children and being dependent on them is not something they would choose. Many others mentioned that retirement services in Australia offered a possible option for them if they needed assistance.

Both refugees and skilled migrants did not feel it necessary for their children to take care of them. They understood and expected that their children would most likely not live with them in adulthood, and that they may need to move to a nursing home at some point. While they hoped that their sons—and children in general—would stay in touch, they did not expect sons to provide housing and emotional support in the same ways that they would have in Vietnam.

Obligations of Sons in Supporting Parents: Children's Views

Most of the children of Vietnamese migrants, whether from refugee or skilled-migrant backgrounds, were aware of family values and spoke highly about the importance of family closeness and support. A key part of son preference is the idea that children should be grateful for their parents' love and support and that first sons should repay that by caring for their parents in later life (Guilmoto 2012).

Almost all the children from refugee backgrounds understood that their parents had left Vietnam under dangerous conditions to create a better future for them. Thirty-seven-year-old Tân arrived in Melbourne with his parents on a boat when he was five years old. His parents had to work hard to support the family, and he is grateful to them: "I appreciate what they have done for me—how much they have done for me. They worked a lot of jobs, supported my sister and myself for school and for university."

Tân's parents were outworkers who sewed garments from home in their early days in Australia. They also took on other manual jobs. Tân was typical of the son participants from a refugee background in this study. Most expressed gratitude for their parents' sacrifices and understood that their parents paid a high price in fleeing from their homeland and resettling in Australia. Most sons said that although their parents did not need them to take care of them or provide for them financially, they would be happy to do so if their parents needed it.

Many of the daughters of refugees did not expect their parents to need support from them. For example, Hoa, a 36-year-old daughter of refugees, said:

My mum and dad own a restaurant. I know that financially they are OK, and I also know that they want to go to nursing homes or other services for the elderly when they need help. . . . My brother and I do not need to think about that [looking after parents] too much.

Hoa has two siblings: an older brother and a younger sister. All of them have their own families and live in different states from their parents. From Hoa's perspective, her older brother is not under any financial obligation to their parents as would be expected in the traditional ideology of son preference in Vietnamese families (Luong Van Hy 2003; Guilmoto 2012).

Regarding the views and practices of sons' obligation to live with their parents, although many of the children were aware of their responsibilities, they did not feel obliged to live with their parents. Bảo, a 14-year-old son of skilled migrants, for example, expressed his dream of living independently:

I will move out because I want to make my decisions, start a new life with my family, and I want to be independent. . . . Nothing wrong with that, I guess. Taking care of them at home? Yes, if they need me I will be happy to do it, but I do not think they need.

Bảo indicated that he could take care of his parents at home, but his expectation was that he would not need to. This idea was echoed in other interviews with children of refugees. Hùng, a 37-year-old oldest son in a refugee family, was not living with his parents at the time of the interview, but with his mother-in-law:

I have been living with my mother-in-law since I married. My parents did not care, and of course, I did not care much about that. She [his mother-in-law] did not want to live alone, so my wife and I decided to live there [his mother-in-law's house].

It is unusual in Vietnamese families for the oldest son to live in his mother-in-law's house, because his own parents are expected to be his first priority (Lê Ngọc Văn 2012; Guilmoto 2015; Den Boer and Hudson 2017). However, for many children of refugees this was not a consideration. It should be noted that in some cases it was still considered important for children to take care of their parents if the parents were in need. The key difference in Hùng's case is that the obligations are now considered obligations of children, not just sons.

Bảo and Hùng are not the only sons in this study who do not expect to live with their parents when the latter get older. The other son participants in the study reported that they appreciated what their parents had done for them and would be happy to support their parents financially, but they still would prefer to live independently.

Discussion

This paper discusses twenty Vietnamese migrant parents and 18 Vietnamese Australian children's views and practices toward cultural values regarding son preference in families. The findings reveal that values regarding the traditional role of sons in Vietnamese families change after migration to Australia: sons are not seen as necessary in Vietnamese Australian families in terms of taking care of and providing financial support to parents in their later lives, and neither migrant parents nor children of migrant parents expect firstborn sons and their families to live with their parents. When migrants come to Australia, they move from a society where children are seen as providing resources to one where they are seen as a cost (Caldwell 1982; 2005). In this study, both groups changed their views on the value of sons. The parent participants did not embrace the traditional roles of sons regardless of the length of time living in Australia, how old they were, their social class, or whether they were from a refugee or skilled-migrant background. Further, this study shows that although almost all participants who were the children of Vietnamese migrants understood the traditional roles of sons in families, they

did not attempt to or plan to practice son preference. All the adult children in this study lived apart from their parents. Many said that they did not need to provide financial or other material support to their parents. Teenage participants tended to be prepared to take care of their parents if the need arose, but planned to set up independent lives outside their parents' houses once they became adults. In other words, son preference values have not been preserved in second-generation Vietnamese people born and raised in Australia.

These findings are a marked contrast from the continued commitment to son preference in contemporary Vietnam (Bélanger 2002; Guilmoto 2012). One of the main factors influencing this is that many elderly parents in Vietnam still face challenges in their old age due to the limitations of the social welfare system and lack of financial security (Goodkind *et al.* 1999). Living in these uncertain conditions leads aging parents to be dependent on their children/sons (Bui The Cuong *et al.* 2000; Guilmoto 2015). As a result, sons are expected to provide first assistance when the parents need help (Friedman *et al.* 2003; Den Boer and Hudson 2017). In this way, having a son is seen as one of the best ways for parents to feel safe and secure in society. In this study, however, the financial security and social welfare available in Australia are found to have greatly influenced parents' and children's attitudes toward son preference values.

This finding suggests that the migration experience has led to a diminishment of the importance of this Confucian value for Vietnamese migrants. After arriving in a new land, the cultural assumptions that migrants bring with them might be preserved or modified in the new cultural setting (McDonald 1995). In this study, son preference was, for the most part, discarded as a key cultural value. Cultural values are preserved in many migrant families through sharing beliefs and practices across generations. In refugee families in particular, retaining cultural practices can be seen as an effective way to reconstruct a livelihood, enhance the ability to settle into a foreign cultural environment, and engage with the new environment in the early stages of resettlement (Loizos 2000). On the other hand, the modification of heritage culture has been seen as an inevitable process that migrants experience when adapting to new contexts where they must engage with new people and different norms and values (Suárez-Orozco *et al.* 2002; Berry 2005; Kutor *et al.* 2021). In line with these views, the evidence obtained in this study reveals that a fundamental aspect of Confucian values regarding son preference in families has been modified and rejected by Vietnamese migrants in the new context of Australia. In other words, Confucianism is not only dismissed by many families in contemporary Vietnam (Guilmoto 2012) but has also been rejected by Vietnamese migrant families.

In addition, previous literature has described immigrant parents as clinging to cul-

tural values of origin and making constant efforts to transfer those values to the next generation (Chaichian 1997; Tingvold *et al.* 2012), while children who are born and raised in the host country tend to be alienated from their ethnic heritage culture (Zhou and Bankston 1998). As a result, the cultural gaps between first-generation parents and children in migrant/immigrant families have been presented as a source of conflict in migrant families (Foner 1997; Zhou 2009). However, it was found in this study that although most parent participants from both refugee and skilled-migrant backgrounds understood values relating to the obligations of sons to financially support and care for their parents, they found it unnecessary to expect their children to practice these values in Australia. Living in a new context, they were confident in identifying which values were unsuitable for their new lives. This adds to the growing body of research aimed at understanding the process of negotiating cultural clashes in immigrant families.

Early findings by Sylvie Dubuc and David Coleman (2007), Kale (2012), and Samantha Postulart and Sharada Srinivasan (2018) have found the persistence of son preference and sex selection behaviors in many Asian communities in the West. The central analysis of these studies has focused on available conditions in the countries of migration, such as the availability of prenatal sex-selective techniques, medical services, and abortion policies, rather than cultural explanations. Our findings have added to the literature by providing a detailed description and interpretation of why son preference does not persist in Vietnamese Australian families. It takes a more embedded perspective to understand how the economic value of sons and the expected flow of wealth from children to parents can shape the parents' attitudes, not just Confucian culture related to gender hierarchy attached to the sons.

Conclusion

In this study we found that after migration to Australia, Vietnamese migrants no longer express a strong preference for sons, and the children of Vietnamese migrants express no preference for sons. Our findings suggest that in Australia, Vietnamese migrants are able to access a strong social support system that provides older adults with financial and material support, including pension, a strong health-care system, and specific care for the aged. The migrants and their children in our study identified this as a key reason why parents did not expect their sons to provide for them. Thus, the patriarchal obligation of sons is challenged when people live in a state where wealth flows from sons are not seen as important by the parents (Caldwell 1982; 2005). It can therefore be expected that economic development and an expanded social welfare system could lead to an

attenuation of the Confucian cultural persistence of son preference in Vietnam.

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